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SUBJECT: VIETNAMESE PRESS AND PUBLIC CONTINUE TO FIRE AWAY ON  
ARRESTS OF JOURNALISTS

Ref: A) HANOI 563; B) 07 HCMC 1136; C) 07 HANOI 2088; D) 07 HANOI  
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1. (SBU) Summary: Widespread criticism continued in the Vietnamese press and blogosphere over the arrest of two journalists for their reporting on the PMU-18 corruption scandal and high-profile figures have offered their support to the journalists. The case is widely seen as reflecting power struggles within the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam, and as undercutting the credibility of the GVN's stated commitment to fighting corruption. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On May 14, Vietnamese press continued to run hard-hitting editorials criticizing the arrest of Tuoi Tre's Nguyen Van Hai, Thanh Nien's Nguyen Viet Chien and their alleged police source in connection to 2006 reports on the Project Management Unit Number 18 (PMU-18) scandal. (Ref. A). Tuoi Tre's front-page editorial said its readers expressed indignation and sent over 2000 letters -- a "record number" -- expressing sympathy for Hai.

3. (SBU) For its part, Thanh Nien said its offices were "swamped" with phone calls from people calling for the journalists to be released and asserted that many National Assembly members, Government of Vietnam (GVN) officials, academics and ordinary people have said Chien's arrest was "unjust and harmful to the common good."

4. (SBU) Thanh Nien ran long exposes from high-level opinion-makers who have questioned the arrests. The Government Inspectorate's Tran Van Truyen was quoted as saying that the charges "against these reporters are not very clear." Tran Dinh Trien, head of the Vietnam Bank Association's Legal Department, doubted the validity of the charges in Thanh Nien and offered to serve as Chien's legal counsel. Many other high-profile figures have come to the defense of the journalists and have offered to help win their freedom.

5. (SBU) Huy Duc, a long-time Vietnamese journalist, wrote in his blog that the arrests "could easily make the public think that people fighting against corruption are being attacked back" but he added that some officials "used the newspapers as a means to further their own cause" in the investigation or for promotion.

Future "Counter-blows?"  
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6. (SBU) In other developments in the case, yesterday the MPS charged but did not arrest MPS Major General Pham Xuan Quac in connection to the 2006 PMU-18 reports. A police contact told us Quac took direction from "a Politburo faction" in releasing information to the journalists on the PMU-18 case. The MPS unit that Quac used to head -- he "retired" from his position in December, 2006 -- carries out investigations of major criminal cases. It remains to be seen how this faction will fight back, if at all, over Quac's arrest, the police contact added. The MPS' General Security Department, a separate office within the large MPS

bureaucracy from Quac's own, took the lead in assembling the case against Quac.

¶17. (SBU) Vietnamese Law Association President Pham Quoc Anh, who is reputed to be aligned with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, on May 14 was quoted in Tuoi Tre as saying he advised the Director of the Supreme People's Procuracy to handle the case of the reporters "carefully." He also warned that the Party allowing former Vice Minister of Transportation Nguyen Viet Tien, who oversaw PMU-18, to resume work at the ministry at about the same time it has led the charge against the journalists might cause the public to pursue "counter-blows."

Comment: When Buffaloes Fight...

¶18. (SBU) There is a Vietnamese saying that when buffaloes fight, insects die. In this case the arrest of the reporters is widely seen as the continuation of the high-level dispute that emerged in the PMU-18 scandal. According to this view, one faction believed to be connected to Prime Minister Dung exposed the scandal in an effort to weaken current Party Secretary General Manh and Manh's faction is now fighting back.

¶19. (SBU) In this struggle the press has not been a disinterested party. Indeed various bloggers have accused Thanh Nien Editor-in-Chief Khe of only allowing his reporters to investigate certain individuals. While no one has accused Thanh Nien of falsely accusing people, they have accused the paper of being selective in its accusations. Late last fall, for example, bloggers reported that Khe had stopped the publication of articles linking HCMC Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai to corrupt land deals. Tuoi Tre, which is regarded as more independent than Thanh Nien, ran the articles about Hai's links to dubious land deals, resulting in reprimands for both the editors and reporters.

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¶10. (SBU) This dispute continues with the results far from clear. What is clear is that the ham-handed manipulation of the press in this case has raised public concern about the GVN's commitment to fighting corruption.

¶11. (SBU) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Ho Chi Minh City.

MICHALAK